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Anita Cortez
Kansas State University

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Reflections on *La Esperanza*

Anita Cortez

It is Christmastime. My birthday is three days away, and I will be 56. There is the ugliest cup on campus sitting on my desk. What does it all mean?

I was asked recently to reflect on my “educational journey,” that perhaps I might shed light on a bit of wisdom waiting to be snapped up like some delectable crumb by a hungry reader. The idea intrigued me. *Hungry wolves on the prowl for scraps of knowledge, sniffing out the scent of understanding, hoping for a whole breastbone of wisdom.* We can be voracious in our appetites. This appetite—the hunger to learn.

As far back as I can remember I have been hungry to learn. A friend once described me as having *hambres atrasadas*, which he described as a kind of “hunger nipping at my heels.” It goes back, of course, to my parents: My father’s and my early journeys scavenging the Wyoming badlands for fossils, arrowheads, and agates and the stories that accompanied them. I was a geologist at the age of four, gathering the most mundane rocks and pebbles to carry home to the garage where I would place them just so on the concrete, then deliver a blow of my hammer that would crack them wide open. Inside that dull exterior I might find a hidden world of crystals or expose a surface so new to light it glistened. At five, I was an anthropologist studying tipi rings and Medicine Wheels tucked away in the Wyoming badlands.

Then my mother, a fourth grade teacher, took over. She brought home workbooks, flash cards, and *gold stars*. She confiscated from the elementary throw-aways a small school desk and filled the drawer with paper and pencils and crayons (the crayon sharpener box). I became a teacher. Every doll and stuffed elephant became my disciple. Today when I read articles about teaching apes to communicate, I think, *That’s nothing. My animals were learning the alphabet when I was five!*

Now at 56, I understand more clearly my parents’ push for learning. I have seen firsthand the grove of trees down past the railroad tracks in that nearly forgotten southeast Kansas town. I have followed my father’s gesture as he pointed precisely to the spot where his family’s boxcar sat. I have heard loudly the message accompanying the silence that follows his memories. *What instructional pedagogy advises whacks with a ruler if a child has difficulty with vocabulary or syntax?* I can see in my mind’s eye his mother, my grandmother, isolated by language and culture, in her boxcar kitchen mixing masa and patting out perfectly shaped tortillas. Her only companionship was the pride she felt in her children, especially in Francisco, Pancho,

her eldest, who was excelling in school. I can see my grandmother come late to the school Christmas pageant, slip silently into the back of the room and stand near the door for quick escape, in order to see her Pancho, dressed in his schoolmate’s store-bought bathrobe—his shepherd’s robe—lead the other, paler magi onto the small stage, his clear tenor voice ringing out across Bethlehem as he sang *en inglés*, “We Three Kings”.

My grandmother, Jesús Cortez de Sierra, died at the age of 34. No one knows why for sure. It might have been a perforated stomach ulcer or perhaps, cancer. Being Mexican and poor, she had access to minimal medical care. My father, her pride and joy, was 16. It fell to him, then, to care for his three younger siblings while his father earned a living.

My mother’s mother was a country school teacher herself, so when my mother received her diploma when I was in the sixth grade, it was already implanted in me that I came from a family of teachers. I resisted the idea of a foregone destiny for years. Teaching seemed so ordinary. A woman’s profession, like hairdresser, or nanny.

It took me many years to discover the true value of teaching. I had a few things to learn myself before I would understand Robert Frost’s words in “Two Tramps in Mud Time”: “One ambition is to unite my vocation and my avocation as my two eyes make one in sight” (Frost, 1946, #160). No matter what paths I pursued in life, certain hungers kept nipping at my heels. I might have been keeping the wolves at bay, much as my grandmother had by patting out tortillas, but ultimately, Education was inevitable. Learning was our destiny.

My educational path took many turns before I landed at Kansas State University where I am today. First, I had a year-long stop at community college where I hit my first real bump of racism. I was an oboist. The school had bought a brand new oboe just for me. I was passionate in my pursuit of the oboe. Until one day, that is. That was the day I arrived at practice, my horn together and warmed, the reed readied. I sat at attention on the edge of my chair, ready to make music. That was the day the director tapped his music stand with his baton and said, “Get out your spic music.”

I could hardly believe my ears. This was not music! These tones made no harmony. I knew the word from somewhere, vaguely, but it had never been in my immediate proximity. Equally astonishing to me was that everyone seemed to understand the command! The members of the band began to rifle routinely through their music folders for the Tijuana Brass composition. I was deeply wounded. I thought I was a valued part of the group. I thought I was among friends. The director never noticed. He raised his arms and the band responded. Business as usual.

It was not business as usual for me, however. My arms wouldn’t search through the folder. The reed refused to move to my lips. I sat there, captive to my own sense of what—justice, myself? I had never felt different from my peers until that moment. In that moment, surrounded by the bright sounds of the Tijuana Brass, I came to understand that I was indeed different. I felt as alienated as my grandmother Jesús. I could do nothing but pack up my oboe and escape out the door.

This was 1970, and I didn’t know I could voice a complaint to anyone. So I went on with my classes, and I played my oboe, but from that day forward, I was someone new. My parents had prepared me for what I would one day encounter, not by warning me or dwelling on my difference. They had taught me that I must excel at whatever I valued. They had taught me without telling me not to allow others to label me.

Anita Cortez is Administrative Director of the Developing Scholars Program at Kansas State University, a program to foster academic research partnerships between under-represented students and faculty members. Over the years, Cortez has worked to further multicultural concerns and opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds. She received the Presidential Faculty Award for Distinguished Service to Minority Students in 2002.

At the end of that year, I ventured down a different path and found myself with a passel of new identities: military wife, mother, south-sea-island woman, then auto sales clerk, sporting goods manager, student wife, veterinary receptionist. None of these new titles came with how-to books. Education took the form of trial and error adventure. I learned I could tolerate cockroaches when necessary. I discovered I liked squid. I could talk auto parts and fish bait. I could edit term papers and calm frightened dogs to passivity. As much as I liked motherhood and seeing my family prosper, I began to feel a void that my family could not fill.

One summer afternoon after work, a bunch of us drove up into the Wyoming mountains for a cook-out and some relaxation. I was sitting on a rock near a stream letting my mind wander when I saw a large fern, almost three feet tall, move erratically. The breeze was minimal, yet this fern was shaking. Then it stopped. I began to think I had imagined it when the fern began to tremble and then suddenly, it got shorter! I called to the others, and we watched this fern until over time, it all but disappeared into the ground. Finally, one among us reached over and grabbed the fern. It gave no resistance. It came easily from the ground, no roots, no leaves left. Some unknown animal underground had satisfied its hunger.

The cook-out turned its attentions to hamburgers and chips, but I could not forget how quickly this tall, healthy fern had simply disappeared. It haunted me. I began to realize I felt just like the fern, as though I were caught in the undertow of someone else's hungers. I knew I had to make some changes. I had to feed my Self.

I decided I would enroll at Kansas State University for fall classes. I went to see an advisor who told me how to go about the process: "Whatever you do," he said, "don't start out by taking a class from Dr. Norma Bunton." He went on to explain that she would be far too demanding and intimidating in her expectations for me, a non-traditional novice.

I left his office feeling rather overwhelmed. I had been told to go fill out a FAFSA (whatever that was), to see the Registrar about my transcripts (*Registrar?*), to talk with an admissions representative, and when all that was accomplished, get in the lines for class selection but get there early as classes fill fast. I decided college was not for me: *I didn't even understand these basic directions!* I went home and did nothing.

Summer came to a close, and on the first day of classes I suddenly found myself longing to be a part of it all. I wanted just one class to see if I had the capacity to learn. I went back to the advisor who was less than pleased to hear that I had done nothing he had advised me to do. A few phone calls later, however, I was officially a Kansas State student. The advisor immediately enrolled me in Dr. Norma Bunton's Intro to Rhetoric class. *What was rhetoric?* I wondered.

Norma Bunton was the first woman department head at Kansas State University. She had served in World War Two. She was tall, straight-backed, silver-haired, and had a no-nonsense air about her. Dr. Bunton took no guff. She became my professor, my mentor, and ultimately, my best friend. She nurtured and encouraged me. She praised and pushed me. She cajoled and scolded me. She believed in me, and more importantly, she made me believe in myself. She fed my *hambres atrasadas*.

Today I tell my students there are many roads that lead to a destination. It may not be a truism that the shortest distance between two points is the fastest route. Paradoxically, the longer, more twisted road, the one with side paths and brambles and unexpected limbs

blocking the way, may be the better route toward knowledge and wisdom. My young students do not always understand there is no one path to follow.

Today I work in an undergraduate research program for high-achieving, serious-minded students who are, for the most part, first generation college students, some inner city, many from families who have immigrated here in the last ten years. *The wolves are nipping at their heels*. I get to know their stories. There are stories of meat packing plants, of cutting carcasses six days a week, stories of humiliation (the boss who calls everyone *María* or *Juan*). Families are divided, some sent to *el Norte* to live with an uncle and go to school, some left in Mexico too old for the trip.

What happens to the children? This is a question for our legislators, I am told, but to me, there is no question. The answer is apparent. The so-called *problem* is transparent. People need to have access to knowledge. Without education, people cannot contribute to their fullest potential. And who, in the deepest well within, does not have Hope? As long as Hope exists, human potential exists. It is when Hope dies that Despair moves in. And Despair can ruin the neighborhood.

Just before the holiday break, a student came to see me. He is a young man of few words. He is a thinker. He is a reader. He is a second-language learner. He makes "A's" though no one would know it from his lips. He is Phi Kappa Phi. He wants to work in a health field, probably become a doctor, in order to help his family and community. He has seen the back-breaking work that leads to health problems. He knows that being poor and minority is bad enough, but being poor, minority, and immigrant can limit one's opportunities even more. Knowing this, he applies the other facts he knows: *Education is the Equalizer*.

He doesn't know this yet from experience. He knows it intuitively. He has read that knowledge is power. He has heard it. He wants to believe it. And so he comes to me. Without knowing my own story, he comes intuitively, seeking that which Dr. Bunton gave to me some years ago. He comes seeking encouragement. He comes seeking hope. He does not know that Dr. Bunton gave me that ugly cup there on my desk: SECRETARY, it proclaims in brash reds and yellow, once filled with Secretary's Day flowers. I kept it at first as a reminder that some day I would not be a secretarial assistant. Now I keep it to remind me how to encourage others, how to be a good mentor. Norma Bunton had stuffed that cup with blossoming Hope.

As I said, my student came to see me before he left for the holidays.

"I have something for you," he said.

He handed me a picture in a frame. There on a stark black background sits a young girl. Her black hair is neatly combed. She wears a simple blouse and sits with her arms resting on a table top, a desk perhaps. Her face is serious, her eyes gaze intently into the darkness. A pencil is in her right hand, poised.

"I made it for your wall," he said simply.

Later, on email I asked him what the drawing should be titled, or what the girl's name was. She has such presence there on the wall of my office that I felt the need to call her by name.

"Ms. Cortez," he wrote back to me, "I think her name should be *Esperanza* but the drawing should be titled *Nuestra Esperanza*. And thank you for *La Esperanza* that you give us all to be successful as students and as a people."

How do I tell him that it is he who has given the gift to me, that in fact, *La Esperanza* existed long before me. She lived in that box-car. She lived with my grandmother as she watched her son sing *en inglés*. She lives in the meat packing plants now, but more and more often these days, she is seen around the university. *La Esperanza* is pacing the halls of academe. Her pencil is writing on the walls.

References

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